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Women and the Revolution in Oman

The Gulf Committee
O.S.C., Leeds

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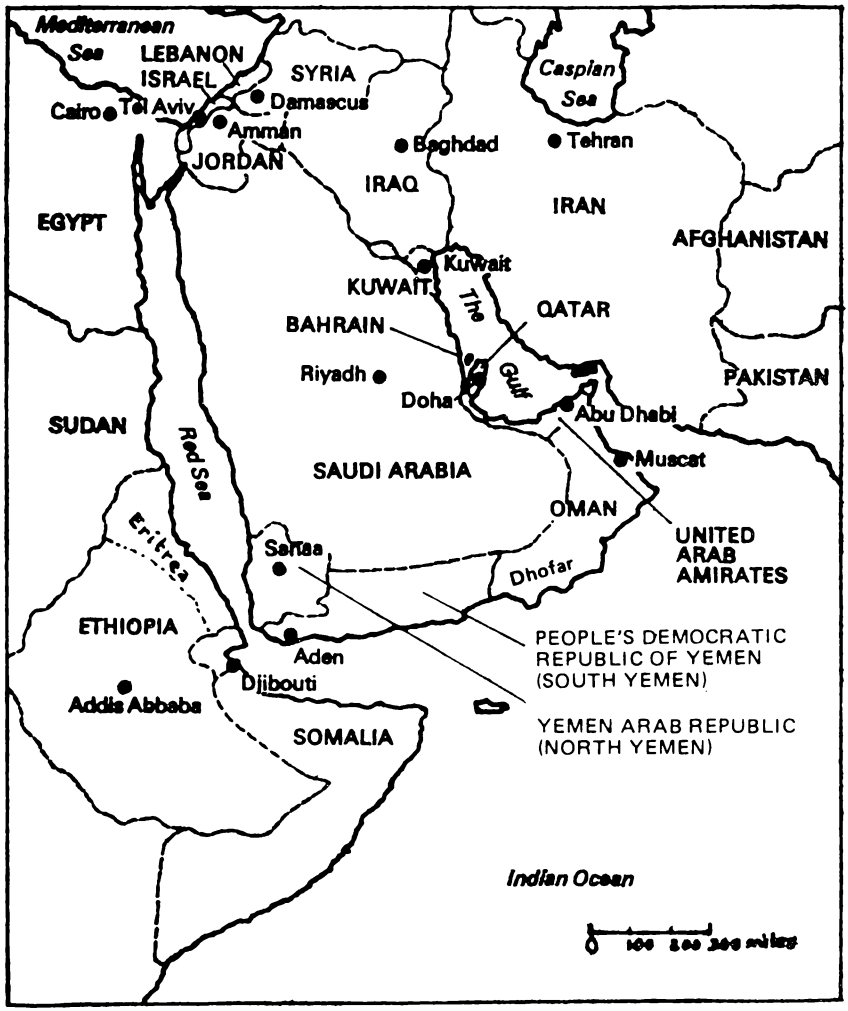

The Arabian Peninsula - Political

Introduction

Oman is a country at the south-east corner of the Arabian peninsular, about the size of Britain and with a population of less than 1.5 million. Though one of the lesser oil-producing countries of the Gulf, it is important strategically as it guards the narrow entrance of the Gulf, which contains two thirds of the world's oil reserves.

In spite of the country's oil reserve, the majority of the people live in extreme poverty: few receive any education, there is virtually no health service outside the principle towns, and there is hardly any regular employment apart from the Sultan's army. Most of the people scrape a living by herding cattle, sheep, goats or camels, though some are able to grow fruit and vegetables.

In contrast, the country's ruler, Sultan Qabus lives in luxury supported only by a wealthy elite of Sheikhs and merchants, and foreign powers mainly Britain.

The war of liberation was launched in Dhofar, the southern province of Oman, on the 9th June 1965, with the aim of ending the oppression the people had been suffering under the British-dominated Al-bu Said dynasty. By 1969, the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman* (P.F.L.O.) had liberated most of Dhofar except for the coastal plain around Salalah, the capital of the province.

In July 1970, increasingly worried by the victories of the Front, the British engineered a 'palace coup', replacing Sultan Said by his son Qabus, and escalated the counter-revolutionary war. At a later stage, foreign forces - chiefly from Iran

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* The People's Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (P.F.L.O.A.G.) decided, in July 1974, that local branches should be autonomous. The Omani branch adopted the name of P.F.L.O.

and Jordan - have been drawn in by imperialism. Without a massive foreign intervention, Qabus' corrupt and repressive rule could not survive.

Although in its tenth year, the revolution in Oman still remains largely unknown and its major achievements unpublicised. No aspect of this revolution is more unknown than the role of women.

This pamphlet outlines the position of women in the traditional Omani society and the changes that have taken place within the revolutionary process.

It is based on documentary material from the periods of 1970-73 and 1975. Due to the fragmented nature of the material available, this pamphlet does not aspire to provide a comprehensive analysis of the question of women.

The first article "Women and the Revolution in the Gulf" was written early this year before the arrival of the 1975 documents. It describes some of the changes which have taken place regarding the position of women in the liberated areas, since 1968 when the Front adopted a policy on the liberation of women.

The first two interviews with "Tufula and Amina" (1970), and with "Saida Saleh Mahad" (1973) provide an insight into the thinking of revolutionary women.

The P.F.L.O. document "Women and the Revolution in the Gulf" (1970) is a theoretical exposition of the position of the women question in pre-capitalist societies which underlines the Front's programme for women's liberation.

"The Role of Women in National Liberation" (June 1975) was one of the documents which was widely circulated for discussion among women prior to the holding of the 1st Congress of the Organisation of Omani Women. This document defines the

the particular context within which the tasks of women's liberation in Oman are fought and relates concretely these tasks to the overall strategy for national liberation.

"The Interview with a Militant in the Organisation of Omani Women" (June 1975) describes the preparations made for the 1st Congress of the O.O.W. and gives an insight into the organisation's methods of work among the masses of women.

The Editors. October 1975.

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Women and the Revolution in Oman

> "We suffered under four sultans. We had the political sultan - the Sultan of Muscat; the tribal sultan - the sheikh; the religious sultan - the Imam: and the family sultan - the father, brother and husband."

The participation of women in armed struggle and the steps taken towards the social liberation of women are two of the most remarkable aspects of the Omani revolution. Karl Marx remarked that the degree of progress achieved by a given society can be measured by the manner in which men treat women in it. The same can be said of revolutions, including those of the third world. One way of estimating how radically a revolution is changing social relations and values is to look at the role played by women.

At its 1968 Hamrin congress, the P.F.L.O. passed resolutions aimed at widespread social and political reforms in the liberated areas and taking up anti-imperialist positions on Arab and world issues. The Congress decided to fight to abolish all forms of social oppression existing in the liberated areas - in particular slavery, tribalism and its consequences, and the oppression of women.

In the words of the resolution: "The revolution has worked to remove the causes and effects of women's inferior position in society, in the belief that women are human beings equal to men. There must be no privileges for one sex over the other. The revolution places men and women on an equal footing both as regards their rights and duties ..... We are beginning to use women's

abilities and to destroy the factors that for centuries have produced the belief that women are stupid." *

This statement expresses the Front's conviction that their revolution cannot be successful unless it includes the liberation of women; but that this liberation will not come about automatically as the result of a resolution but will be the result of a protracted struggle against the objective backwardness of the society and the attempts of the Sultan to destroy the liberated areas.

The Position of Women in Traditional Dhofari Society

In the Dhofari countryside women's status has always been very much better than anywhere else in the Yemen or in Gulf societies. This is partly to be explained by Dhofar's isolation and the fact that the influence of Islam was weaker there than elsewhere. Another factor was its character as a herding society, which meant that pre-capitalist relations of production had not yet resulted in a complete sexual division of labour and property. Women were entitled to own and inherit cattle - the main resource; less stigma was attached to divorce and remarriage than elsewhere; women were relatively free to travel and work within Dhofar without sexual segregation.

However, under the rule of Sultan Said (1932-1970), women's position worsened because they were excluded from education and were not allowed to emigrate and work in the Gulf, as men were. They were consequently illiterate and lacked effective means of social expression in contrast to men. Polygamy was practiced by local tribal leaders. Women did not have the same rights to divorce as

* P.F.L.O. quoted in F. Halliday, Arabia Without Sultans, Pelican, 1974, p.376.

men. They could be divorced under any pretext whereas they needed considerable grounds to have a divorce granted in their favour. The practice of clitoridectomy* was widespread. Moreover the brideprice** reduced women to the status of commodities: their fathers would marry them off to whoever was able to pay the highest brideprice, usually an old man.

The story of Ali Bakhit and his wife shows the kind of burden imposed on young people by this system. She was married to a man she did not love, who agreed to divorce her on condition that her father returned the brideprice (400 rials). In the end her father agreed to pay half of this and Ali himself was forced to pay the rest, plus a new brideprice to the father. This amounted to another 200 rials, half a camel and 20 goats, to which was added the cost of the marriage feast. This threw the young couple heavily in debt.

Participation of Women in the Revolution

> "Women represent half of society; if this half is paralysed, the cause of the people cannot be victorious."

One of the principle aims of the revolution was to enable women, through their participation in the struggle for national liberation and in productive work, to win equal rights and change prevailing social attitudes towards them.

"The importance of women's liberation through participation in the struggle, became clear as from the start women had spontaneously joined men and supported them in the battle, and in so doing

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* female circumcision

** the sum of money paid by the husband to the wife's family.

had weakened some aspects of their oppression. According to a P.F.L.O. analysis, women responded more militantly than men to the outbreak of the struggle and rallied more spontaneously. This soon clashed with social relations. Women began to keep food in reserve for fighters who might arrive unexpectedly: husbands often opposed this and the women were forced to hoard the food secretly. Many women wanted to leave their parents or husbands in order to work on the battle front." *

It would be naive to establish any mechanical relation between women's participation in the revolution and their liberation as women: they could participate in fighting but remain oppressed in other social relations. It is however, difficult to see how women's liberation from oppression as women, could have begun without this first step which made the contradictions clear. For the women concerned, political participation in itself constituted an act of rebellion against family and established traditions which lead at times to a decisive break with submission; conversely, the participation of women in politics compelled the political organisation itself to define its position on the issue of women.

The story of Aziza, a Dhofari woman, illustrates this process. Her husband objected to her participation in political acticity, but she fled from home and walked for days until she reached the training camp where she volunteered for the women's platoon. Her husband followed her and demanded that his wife be returned to him. The Front refused on the grounds that Aziza had joined the People's Liberation Army of her own free will.

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* F. Halliday, ibid, p.377-8.

Outside the Army, many women attend literacy and political education classes. Literacy is taught through the "alphabet of the revolution" which would be in English, 'c' for 'class', 'p' for 'peasant', 'r' for 'revolution', 's' for 'society', etc..... One of the political lessons taught to militants of both sexes is on women's liberation and it emphasizes that this liberation as a measure of the achievements of the revolution and the level of political consciousness of both men and women militants in the liberated areas.

Women in the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman

The Front's two schools - the Lenin school and the 9 June school - have a high intake of girl students who come from all over the liberated areas. They stay there to learn Arabic and to get a general education in politics and conventional subjects. Although at the beginning it was difficult to persuade parents to release their daughters from the tasks of herding and to allow them to leave home for long periods, by 1973 there were over 300 women students out of 1,000. They receive the same education as boys and participate equally in the tasks of running the schools in a democratic way with staff and students sharing in cooking and guard duties.

In 1973 the Front's revolutionary training camp, where cadres of the P.L.A. and the militia are trained, also had about 30% women among its members. They participated in all training and other tasks and were being trained to join the army or the militia as full and equal members. Additional care is given to the education and training fo women as it is assumed that centuries of double oppression have given them a handicap which needs to be compensated for by a more concentrated effort in political education.

Women in the Liberated Areas

> "The Omani people will continue to struggle using every means possible for the following objectives: to guarantee equality for both women and men in all spheres, and to offer all assistance to the movement by women to raise their status so that they can effectively take an equal part in building our country." *

Before the revolution began in 1965, a number of superstitious taboos were enforced in Dhofar. Women for example, were forbidden to milk cows; if they did, it was believed the cows would stop producing milk. They were also forbidden to carry guns. When the question of women came up, and the long battle against male domination began, these taboos made some of the tasks of the Front easier. Once it had been proved through practice that women could milk cows or carry guns without bringing about any major disasters, it became easier to argue against other forms of male privilege. The influence of the Front, through political education of the people as well as the example of its cadres, is gradually affecting the attitude of ordinary people in the liberated areas, concerning the position of women. The fact that most women attend literacy classes and are active in political matters has helped to change their position in the mountains. The presence of women cadres showing by example that women are as able as men in all matters, is also a powerful catalyst to change people's attitudes.

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* National Programme of P.F.L.O., in Documents of the National Struggle in Oman and the Arabian Gulf, The Gulf Committee, p. 99-103.

But it is the new marriage and divorce laws implemented in the liberated areas which most directly affect the daily life of women there. In 1970, a women's platoon proposed the abolition of the brideprice. In September of that year the General Command of the Front issued a statement reducing the brideprice to a nominal sum as a transitional step towards its abolition. The purpose of the measure was to "allow men and women to choose freely their partners without compulsion or interference from a third party."

"This was the first such measure passed anywhere in the Arab world and threatened to destroy a cornerstone of the traditional system. In a society between whose members there is little material distinction, and where social relations are structured more by tradition than by control of the means of production, the brideprice was one of the bases of power, both of men over women and of older men - fathers, over younger men - prospective husbands. Insofar as wealth did vary between tribes, the brideprice ensured that men from lower tribes did not marry women from higher tribes. The brideprice meaned that women were bought and sold like cattle and also acted as a lock on the hierarchy of the traditional system as a whole." *

The new marriage laws mean that a couple may now marry because they want to, regardless of their family's attitude to the marriage. The nominal brideprice is used to pay for the marriage celebration itself or to help the young couple to set up home. Polygamy has been abolished. Divorce must now be granted by the local representative of the Front and men are no longer allowed to

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* F. Halliday, ibid, p.381.

divorce their wives as they wish. Both men and women can apply for a divorce on similar grounds after a minimum period of marriage. Acceptable grounds for divorce are: suspicion of the partner's political position; lack of material support or total disagreement between the partners.

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Interviews

Interview with Two Revolutionary Women:

Tufula and Amina *

At the Camp of the Revolution in 1970, two young members of the women's training group, Tufula, aged fifteen, and Amina, aged twelve, gave a vivid account of the life they had left, and of their experiences after joining the revolution:

Q: Why are you fighting in support of the revolution?

Tufula: Because British imperialism is killing our men and women. We are fighting to drive it out.

Q: Tell us about your family.

Tufula: My family are shepherds in the western province and I used to work with them. For three months of the year we grew crops, and for the rest of the time we were nomads, herding our flocks. I never went to school or learned to read. I joined the Front two years ago, and my parents tried to stop me. I felt I should join my comrades.

Q: Amina, can you tell us how you came to join the Front?

Amina: I lived in Salala, the capital and you can't escape by land as it is surrounded by a big fence. So I escaped by sea with my brother. That was last September.

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* In 1971, following this interview, Tufula was killed in a British bombing raid and Amina was seriously wounded in the back.

Q: Why did you run away?

Amina: Because of imperialism. My father was a poor farmer; he got four or five rupees a day. We were very poor. So my brother got an old car-tyre and we swam in the sea for eight hours till we reached the coast-line controlled by the Front.

Q: Weren't you cold and frightened? Could you swim?

Amina: I couldn't swim well, and we got very cold and hungry, and thirsty. But it is better to die in the sea than be captured by the British.

Q: Who thought of escaping, you or your brother?

Amina: Everyone thinks of escaping.

Q: What is life like in Salala? Have you seen British officers or the Sultan?

Amina: Sometimes I'd see British officers out shopping, but they generally stay in their base. I've never seen the Sultan .....

Q: How did you hear about the Front in Salala?

Amina: People found leaflets against the Sultan. They said: 'This is good and so is the revolution.'

Q: Tufula, since joining the Front what have you done?

Tufula: Well, at first I was in the militia, the Popular Guard, and then I took part in defending Shahbout when the enemy attacked it in the summer of 1969. The battle lasted for twenty-four hours and I carried

water to the fighters at the front. I think that I was the first woman in the western area who joined the army.

Q: When did you learn to speak Arabic?

Tufula: The Front taught me, and I learned from working with comrades in the Front. But it is still difficult.

Q: What have you learnt from the Front since you fled, Amina?

Amina: I've learned literacy, politics and revolution.

Q: Do you ever miss your parents?

Amina: I don't think about my parents, I think about the revolution .....

Q: What do you think of the relations between men and women and the system of marriage contracts here?

Tufula: It is a pity to ask something from a person if you are going to marry him. If I want a man, I'll marry him because I want to and he won't have to buy me. Anyway, there is no difference between men and women, and I've seen that we can do the same as men do. Before the revolution women used to be bought and sold like animals. Now they know their rights and take part in the struggle along with everyone else.

Q: What do you think of Islam? Are you religious?

Tufula: I live in a society of people who pray and I am one of them.

Q: Do you find that men resist the equality of women and hang onto their old ideas? What about marriage here?

Tufula: Marriage has to come after the revolution as it might slow down our work during the struggle. We are fighting here in Dhofar and Dhofar is part of the Gulf. There is a problem about women participating since their families usually resist and some people say that if women join, the British will come and take them and kill them. But people are getting over this .....

Q: After the revolution would you like to go abroad and visit any other country?

Tufula: I'd like to visit the countries that are helping us. People's China and the People's Republic of South Yemen.

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Interview with a Militant from the Liberated Areas :

Saida Saleh Mahad

A clear picture of the changes that took place in the liberated areas was given by Saida Saleh Mahad, who was interviewed by a member of the Gulf Committee in April 1973. When asked about her former life and the changes that have taken place since the war of liberation started, she said:

"In the old days we were dominated by men and our family, and treated like animals. We were never allowed to voice our opinions, only seen as things to be sold or bought for the amusement of men. Despite this we did most jobs and had

had ordinary feelings of happiness and sadness for our families, but they still saw us as animals. Nobody considered our opinions or listened to us.

Then the revolution came and started to fight for women's freedom and to end the domination of the family and of men. The Front explained that women and men can do the same jobs and have the same abilities; we understood that many things would have to change. Now women can do the same things as men and people care for our opinions politically, militarily and socially. We have opened the way to do useful things for our people and ourselves, which will help the revolution to win victory against the enemy.

We still have not won complete equality with men in some things, like education, because our country is still colonised by the enemy. But also because we haven't yet got rid of all the old habits. In towns women are still dominated by men and their families as before; they are not allowed to go into the streets without wearing a veil or to see people in their houses. In the mountains however, there have been many changes."

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Interview with a Militant in the Organization of Omani Women - June 1975 - (excerpts)

Q: Can you describe the preparations that are being made for the First Congress of the Organisation of Omani Women?

A: Preparations for the congress, both on the organisational level and in mass work, began three months ago when the preparatory committee was set up. Sub-committees have been set up and their members travel to parts of the liberated areas where there are a large number of women, to the town and countryside, and contact women militants in the People's Liberation Army. Women are being mobilised through different activities:

1. Regular visits are made to women in their homes to explain the importance of the Organisation of Omani Women and the vital role women can and must play in support of the revolution in addition to their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

2. Weekly political discussion meetings are organised to emphasize the need for active participation by women in the O.O.W. since women cannot begin to struggle for their own liberation until they are fully aware of their double oppression and the need for liberation. Women are encouraged to take part in activities outside the home, such as literacy classes, clothing centres, depending on their needs and skills.

3. Many women have joined new classes teaching literacy and politics set up by the sub-committees. They have also joined the new centres set up to make clothes for school children and soldiers.

Right: A woman member of the P.L.A.

Bottom: Two women training in the 'Revolution's Camp'.

4. In some areas women have taken the initiative in tasks such as gathering firewood, unloading supplies from ships and transporting them to storage areas. The sub-committees organise and popularise such activities.

The preparatory committee has also held several meetings to evaluate its own work and the work of its sub-committees. It has produced a draft resolution and several studies to be distributed for discussion before being submitted to the Congress.

Q: What roles are women playing in the revolution and what steps has the Front taken to remove obstacles to women's liberation?

A: One of the most important principles of the revolution in Oman is that the masses are the makers of history and the most important factor in the revolution. Hence the revolution cannot ignore one half of society - women - and the importance of the question of women's liberation. The revolution tries to mobilise women for the struggle, to solve the immediate social problems facing them and to encourage them to be active in all fields of the struggle.

1. Military

The most important role played by Omani women is the role of soldier. Women are given military training in the "camp of the revolution" and they fight side by side with men under harsh conditions. They also take part in the militia and back up the Liberation Army by delivering supplies, water and messages, by watching enemy movements and helping with the medical service.

2. Political

Women play an important role in the field of political education. Political education was reorganised when the Organisation of Omani Women opened centres to arrange political discussion meetings and regular visits to women in their homes.

3. International Solidarity

The Organisation of Omani Women takes part in international conferences in order to publicize the revolution in Oman and mobilise material and moral support for it. The O.O.W. hopes to invite delegations of women from other countries to visit the liberated areas at the time of the first congress.

4. Omani Red Crescent

Women participate in the work of the Omani Red Crescent. Their role in this field is still limited because it is difficult for many women with families to devote the time required to do this job and because there are still many backward attitudes prevailing towards nursing work.

5. Literacy Classes

Women have played a very active role in the literacy campaign. After being slowed down by temporary difficulties, this campaign has now been intensified again.

6. Clothing Centre

This activity has been resumed and now supplies the needs of soldiers and school children in the liberated areas. It also produces traditional Omani garments for use in fund-raising activities.

The revolution tries to encourage women to enter the military training camp, to attend literacy classes

in the liberated areas and to take nursing courses both in the liberated areas and abroad. No doubt there are other fields in which women can and will participate. The ten years of struggle we have carried on have shown us new possibilities and changed our way of thinking: we are still at the beginning of a long road but have already taken a big step forward.

There have been cases of men defecting to the enemy side and their wives have refused to follow them and have asked for divorces. In one case, the husband returned with a gang of mercenaries to force his wife to follow him. With the support of her comrades, she fought back and the gang had to retreat.

Because women take an active part in production, they have been able to overcome social obstacles and play an important role in the revolution. Radical changes have taken place in the thinking of both men and women. Women no longer depend on men, as they do in bourgeois societies, since both women and men depend on the revolution. As a result, new types of relationships between men and women are developing.

Q: One of the main obstacles to women's liberation has always been the backward attitudes of both men and women. How do you overcome this difficulty?

A: The revolution in a backward country like Oman is faced with many difficulties in trying to achieve its tasks - the struggle for freedom and progress; the overthrow of colonialism and its local agents and the struggle against poverty, ignorance and bad health.

One of these difficulties is the fatalist attitude found among some people. This attitude is reinforced by the counter-revolutionary propaganda campaign of Sultan Qabus: "Revolution cannot be justified, or at any rate can no longer be justified since Sultan Said has been replaced.

Women are no longer required to wear veils. Educated women can take jobs in the civil service, the police corps or as secretaries." This kind of slanderous propaganda always goes on to allege that the revolutionaries are only a handful of communists who advocate the communalisation of women .....

These lies no longer deceive the masses. Women understand that when colonialism and its agents open the country to monopoly capital, the result is even greater exploitation, especially of women, who are doubly oppressed. Women are struggling to remove all the obstacles to their liberation, including the backward attitudes of some men who are unaccustomed to seeing women in responsible positions. We attempt to raise the consciousness of such men.

There are other problems arising from pregnancy, childbirth and the care of children. Women are spontaneously organising to solve such problems: they take turns to look after children collectively. We have to take up these forms of organisation and popularise them. One of our plans is to set up nurseries throughout the liberated areas.

We have attempted to summarise the present situation. We are confident in the future, and the important role women will play in the struggle to build a better life for all our people.

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Women and the Revolution in the Gulf

In all class society, women are oppressed and exploited. It is not only women who suffer from the economic structure of class society, workers and peasants also suffer exploitation. But women workers and peasants, in addition to this suffering, also suffer from their position in the family. Moreover, women suffer from a general form of social oppression, since society imposes traditions and archaic habits on them which paralyse them and prevent them from living and thinking as human beings.

We will not, however, discuss the problems of women in general; we - the Front men and women - want to transform the position of women in our society; and one means towards that end is their still greater participation in the armed war of liberation; which has now (1970) been going on for five years in Dhofar, and has extended to the area of Inner Oman.

Since armed revolution broke out in Dhofar, first in the villages, then spreading through the country side, it has developed the political potential of the people in the area. The historic changes of the past five years have brought about certain changes in the general ideology of the rural population. Experience of struggle and revolutionary activity has eliminated many backward ideas and the ideology of the impoverished masses has been positively reconstructed, free from weakness of thought of surrender.

There are two main aspects of the revolutionary struggle: revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary organisation. We do not call for

'violence as a solution to all problems', though we do believe in its 'ability to instill a revolutionary spirit in the minds of the masses'.

We cannot in all honesty, claim that our struggle has reached its full revolutionary potential. The development and escalation of our revolution has caused considerable changes in the position of women whose consciousness has grown and is still growing with the development of the armed revolution and its military successes throughout the country, though it is especially strong among rural women reflecting the success of the revolution in the countryside. This has been achieved in spite of the fact that the political mobilisation of the masses has still a long way to go; and in our view is due primarily to the position of women in the social and family environment in the rural areas and secondly to the high level of consciousness which prevails there, as opposed to the urban areas.

Although we cannot analyse the social structure of the rural areas here in detail, we will analyse the position of women and their present and potential support for the revolution as well as the position of the revolutionary movement towards women. But first let us briefly survey the social structure of the countryside and attempt to identify and classify its constituents.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, we must stress that there are two different types of rural areas; they both have specific structural constituents, but they are nevertheless interdependant in their formation and historical development. They are:

1. The narrow coastal plain near the towns and villages, where two types of agricultural ownership and many forms of exploitation are found.

2. The mountains which cover a larger area. These are the heart of the revolution; our discussion will concentrate on them.

The Social Structure of the Rural Areas

In the mountains, the people live primarily and almost exclusively, from herding. In other words, animals are the only means of production and their ownership is widely distributed among the population. There are very few rural families who own no animals at all. Although there are definite differences in the level of ownership, these differences are only marginal: they are insufficient either to create opportunities for employment beyond the family or to allow competition in the marketing of goods produced in this simple and primitive productive system.

It is significant that in many cases women as well as men own the means of production. It can happen for instance that within a single family women own more animals than their husbands, or women may even own some while their husbands own none. In both these cases the husband and the entire family are dependent on the mother.

We have described the countryside as a primarily pastoral society. This is because agriculture is limited to the three months of the rainy season, in summer (July - September). During this period two grain crops are grown in small quantities by basic farming methods involving only sowing and harvesting. Private ownership, as it is usually understood, does not exist in agriculture; instead a form of flexible tribal ownership is practiced. This is due to three main factors: the limited productivity of agriculture; the scarcity of agricultural tools; and the nature of this nomadic, pastoral society itself.

Left: Rural women in traditional dresses.

Bottom: Under poverty and oppressi in the mountain areas peo lived in caves. In the li rated areas caves provide shelter from air-bombing.

From this brief survey of the social structure in the rural areas we can draw some conclusions which will help us to understand the situation of women:

1. The low productivity of labour, both in the pastoral and agricultural fields, affects the position of women and men in similar ways.

2. The sexual division of labour hardly exists: men and women work together in all forms of production, in the family as well as in the society.

3. The society still retains some of the features of an earlier classless society (primitive communism), e.g. common ownership.

4. Women may have economic control within the family.

These four points and their inter-relation can help us to distinguish and interpret characteristics of the position of women in the mountains.

This conclusion is compatible with and confirms the correctness of the Marxist analysis according to which the oppression of women and the deterioration of their position are a result of the development of the division of labour, and of private property. Although the oppression of women has throughout history paralleled class oppression, the similarity between the situation in the mountains and classless society provides us with the necessary arguments and interpretations. But no-one could claim that this society is free from oppression and exploitation when this is clearly not the case. What we are trying to show is that oppression in the rural areas is a result of the inter-relationship between this rural society and the society which surrounds it.

No doubt the unusual situation of women, a natural consequence of the area's specific social structure, has protected women from many of the prohibitions and restrictions which our sisters in the towns suffer from, not only in Dhofar, but in the Arab Gulf as a whole. The special position of rural women can be summarised as follows:

1. They have a less oppressive moral and social position. Women are not seen as mere objects of pleasure and producers of children, but are respected and appreciated within the society and by men.

2. They are free from some of the traditions which paralyse and weaken women when they are imprisoned at home, e.g. the imposition of the veil, prohibiting social contact between men and women, considering women as objects dependent on men. Here women walk unveiled and mix freely with men. They talk to whoever they want to - male or female - and go for visits without having to obtain the permission of their husbands or fathers. To run their family's affairs, they travel as they please and stay away from home for long hours sometimes all day, looking after livestock.

3. Women play a positive role in the economic life of society and participate in all vital work.

4. Women are relatively free from the spiritual domination which gives men absolute privileges over women. For instance, it is acceptable for rural women to divorce their husbands.

Rural Women Support the Revolution

Rural women's attitudes to the revolution and its development stem from their historical

situation. Despite the fact that women were at first suspicious and had strong reservations, even fears, concerning the revolutionary movement, a number of fundamental transformations have taken place in the already unstable social structure, which have contributed to its disintegration. There is no doubt that the attitude of the revolutionaries on the one hand and the attitude of the rural masses on the other, women in particular, have contributed considerably to the rapid development of women's awareness.

Very early on, rural women showed positive reactions to the armed struggle and were ready for sacrifices. This attitude grew and developed. To specify the characteristics of women's attitudes, it is important to point out that:

1. Women manifested greater interest than men in the activities of the revolution, devoting more attention to its achievements and military reports.

2. Women showed considerable desire for political enlightenment and an outstanding aptitude at political understanding.

3. Women were keen to eliminate illiteracy and were more forceful than men in their demands for literacy.

4. Women often retained part of their family's scanty food supply for potential visits from revolutionaries, without informing their husbands or imposing this economic burden on them; they did this without being deterred by the possible consequences for their families.

5. Women nursed the wounded despite their lack of training.

6. They shouldered many strenuous tasks and suffered hardship to provide water and ammunition to the front lines.

7. They courageously faced the dangers inherent in reconnaissance and intelligence tasks.

8. They demanded weapons and the right to fight alongside men at the front, so as to fully participate in the revolutionary struggle.

It should be mentioned here that women fulfilled the above-mentioned roles and shouldered their duties on their own initiative, without preparation or education. In other words, women involved themselves in the revolution. The part they played in the revolution, fighting against imperialism, is itself a progressive development which is important to the total struggle. Because the revolution involved women, the question of the position of women became an organisational priority: this developed from the direct connection between the women's struggle and the class struggle. Women have committed themselves to the cause and struggle of the oppressed classes, and thus identified themselves as belonging to the revolutionary forces.

Three main points arise from the revolutionary achievements of women:

1. Women must be able to participate fully in the struggle.

2. Women must lead this movement to make it serve more effectively the struggle to end class oppression, whether at home or throughout the area.

3. Class consciousness must be seen as a priority, as it cannot be imported from abroad or develop spontaneously. It should emerge from the

revolutionary vanguard represented by the revolutionary organisation based on Marxist-Leninist theory.

Since its Second Contress (Hamrin 1968), the Front considers women's contribution to the struggle to be one of the conditions for the success of the revolutionary action in changing the social reality. It took up the issue at the ideological and practical levels in 1968 as a result of practical proposals. This resulted from the logic that links the ideological and intellectual front with practical revolutionary struggle. The Front is convicned that women should take part and commit themselves to contributing to the revolution. This is one of the practical issues which the struggle must face and solve.

The national liberation struggle is the framework within which we mobilise and recruit women and carry out the struggle against women's oppression. Women have proved that they are capable of carrying out all the tasks of the revolution as well as men, and it is this that has placed the struggle against women's oppression at the centre of the revolution's strategy at all levels - military, political organisational and ideological.

The important part played by women in the army and as political cadres has broadened our view of the mobilisation of the people in an organised mass movement. The newly-trained women demanded that we concentrate on analysing and solving the basic problems faced by women, and the obstacles to their liberation. The position of women and their part in the revolutionary movement is the real test of a revolution's creativity and commitment.

In conclusion let us identify the points on which we should concentrate and their practical applications:

1. To develop ideological and political analysis under the leadership of women cadres.

2. To include women cadres as basic elements of the Front's organisation and to give these cadres full responsibilities at all levels.

3. To diffuse a revolutionary class culture among the broad masses of women.

4. To intensify the literacy programmes and political education classes among women.

5. To provide constant encouragement to the women revolutionary cadres to use their energies and potential and to develop all their abilities by scientific analysis.

6. To build a women's movement for the whole Gulf from Dhofar to Kuwait.

7. To encourage leading women cadres at the ideological, military and organisational levels in order that they may in future lead and build up women's units.

8. To send women on political, health and military missions to socialist countries for training.

The People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf, 1970.

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The Role of Women in National Liberation

A clear understanding of the role of women in society constitutes the scientific basis for analysing the question of their liberation. No-one is more capable of understanding this role than the women workers' movement which develops within the heart of capitalist society. This women's movement takes many different forms which vary from country to country depending on the concrete conditions in the country concerned and its labour movement.

For us the memory of the brave martyrs who died on the battlefield and of the comrades who were tortured to death in the prisons of the puppet Sultan Qabus drive us to advance the women's movement in Oman and to develop it further.

The Omani revolution has embraced the issue of women's liberation and has emphasised that it constitutes an organic part of the social question as a whole. Toiling women, before anything else, suffer from enslavement and deprivation which compels them to fight for their liberation and to fight in the first place for the complete liberation of their class. This necessitates a close link between women and the mass movement in general, mobilising a mass women's movement which will work both for the mass movement as a whole and for women's liberation.

The liberation of women does not come through men making concessions to women, but through constant organised struggle by women at the economic, social and political levels. The liberation of women is not indicated by the percentage of female workers or employees in

government departments or corporations, nor by the number of employees or secretaries in Ministries, nor by the number of educated women or university graduates: the liberation of women comes through the effective contribution of women at the productive, social and political levels.

It was from this point of view that the Omani revolution approached the question of the liberation of women and so raised this as a slogan. It incorporated it into its actual practice which is to make women participate in the mass struggle as a whole. It then worked to organise the women's struggle within a special women's organisation, making clear that women will not remain important only at home.

In the view of the revolution the liberation of women starts with a mass struggle against the atomised household economy which imprisons women. With this in mind, the Organisation of Omani Women has established its working programme and has drawn up the plan of its development within the women masses as part of a political programme. It moreover stresses specific tasks and calls for their implementation during the stage of national revolution which is being waged by the Omani people under the leadership of the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman.

These tasks are summarised as follows:

1. The enlightenment of women and their mobilisation and acquaintance with the question of their liberation; the realisation that it cannot be achieved except through the liberation of the entire society from colonialism and its puppets in the area.

2. To educate the broad masses of women in a patriotic spirit and to include these masses in the ranks of the Omani revolution under the leadership of the P.F.L.O.

3. To educate women and eradicate illiteracy by opening literacy centres in areas populated by illiterate women.

4. To organise weekly courses to explain social and political issues.

5. To transform women's situation by getting them to join in mass activities and in the struggle against the British and Iranian colonial presence in Oman.

6. To struggle against incorrect ideas that women's only role is marriage and the production of children.

This does not mean that we are against women who get married and have children. The bearing of children and their upbringing is a natural thing. What we are fighting against is the belief that such tasks are the only role of women. We have succeeded to a considerable extent in mobilising the masses of women and have managed to gain acceptance not only among young but even among mothers and other older women. Large numbers of women have taken advantage of education, including those who had been denied it under Qabus's regime. In addition many members of the Organisation of Omani Women joined the military training camps to fight British colonialism and the Iranian invader and to defend the Arabism of Oman.

It is clear that an understanding of the significance of the women question coupled with an understanding of the participation of women in the national struggle is a first and essential

step towards their emancipation. The main tasks of the women's and of other organisations include: explanation to all women of the nature of their basic human rights; how they can fight for these rights; and what major role women can play in reconstructing society.

The importance of the question of women's liberation became clear in the early years of the struggle and the '9th June Revolution' has now made great steps forward along the way to freeing women from oppression. Poor women shared in the great struggle for liberation: since part of the former division of labour chained women down, this was abolished and so women were drawn away from cooking and towards the battle-field where the battle for freedom is being fought! Women no longer feel trapped by the normal needs of the family and homecare when bullets are roaring outside and artillery shells are thundering from the enemy gun which is trying to silence the voice of the masses in revolt.

The Organisation of Omani Women is at present working to train women cadres who can lead the Omani women's movement as a whole and form a women's vanguard. It will in no way compromise on the demands of women and the necessity for equality with men. Nor will it allow anyone to paralyse the activities of women or to put a stop to them after the completion of the liberation struggle. We are well aware that traditional ideas remain in the minds of many people for a long time - even after the completion of a change in the social system. We are building a cadre force in order to be able to lead women towards their liberation, so that they will reach the end of the road and not stop half way there.

Some people consider the work of women outside the home as a deviation from social norms and hope to force them back into their homes. But the Organisation of Omani Women maintains that working women are not only members of the working class, but are at the same time representative of half of the human race; the responsibilities of women to society will remain to some extent different from men's because women are not only independent workers and citizens but also mothers. This requires a number of special demands in certain fields such as protection for working women, matrimonial and child welfare, and help in bringing up children and carrying out housework.

Given our analysis of the concrete conditions of Oman, we have started to mobilise women by using special methods to address them and to work among them. We are working to establish a special agitation department for women; its first task is to meet the specific problems of the less-educated women, to raise their understanding and to lead them towards revolutionary struggle. The other target is to enable women to raise their own demands in their capacity as women, and to defend demands such as maternity and child welfare provisions, the reduction of housework etc. We have laid down the basis for this work and hope to develop it in the coming period.

The struggle of Omani women is beginning to be widely known. Their participation in the people's liberation war and in the battles to defend their homeland confirms the capacities of women when they find sincere and genuine leadership for their struggles. The sacrifices of our women martyrs confirm that women are equal to men when they realise their duties and rights and when the path they must take for their liberation becomes clear.

There is the wonderful example of comrade Nashita who gave clear proof of her courage when she participated in the battle against the October-November 1971 attack on the Eastern region of Dhofar and was killed chanting "Long Live the Revolution". There are many like Nashita. There was Tufula Mutie, the first woman to die in the revolution: after graduating from the military training course at the 'camp of the revolution', she was killed while carrying out her duties for the revolution and the Omani people.

The Omani women's movement has seen dozens of its members sent to the government's prisons in Kut al-Jalali and Beit al-Falaj; the British and Jordanian intelligence men throw young women into the cells when the only charge against them is the growth of their national consciousness. To stop this national consciousness from developing, the regime threw dozens of women into prisons without allowing even their parents and relatives to visit them, and practiced different forms of physical and psychological torture on them. They ignore the rights of these women and the feelings of Omani people towards their daughters, sisters and wives. The Organisation of Omani Women is increasing its following and developing its struggles within the general mass struggle for the liberation of Oman and to rid the Omani territory of the British colonialists and the Iranian invaders.

We are well aware that the struggle of women for their liberation cannot come through developing hostility towards men but through opposing the ideas which make women prisoners of their homes. These ideas belong to the ruling class in Oman, and have been imposed on men and women alike. We are fighting to remove such ideas and those

associated with the tribal system of decaying Sultanic rule from the minds of men and women alike. In order to remove these obstacles to the liberation of women, we must overthrow the puppet Sultanic regime, which is based on American and British military bases and which is protected by Iranian reaction. This is why the Organisation of Omani Women has established its first working programme for consistent struggle and for the consolidation of the mass liberation movement against the rule of a puppet Sultan in Oman.

The Organisation of Omani Women
June 1975.

(The first Congress of the O.O.W. was held in June 1975).

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9th June Studies:
Oman: a class analysis
The Oman War 1957-59
The United Arab Amirates

Gulf Committee Publications:
Documents of the National struggle in Oman and the Arabian Gulf.
Political Prisoners in the Oil States: Bahrain, Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia.
Oil and Investment in Oman.
Arms build up in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf.

The Gulf Committee, founded in 1971, is an independent group working in support of the Liberation movements in the Arabian peninsula and Iran.
It publishes a periodical GULF BULLETIN and other background material.
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